Optimizing Your Writing Process: Write Nonlinearly

Perfectionists tend to see their projects as long strings of words—and there's a natural tendency, when you have that viewpoint, to want to start at the beginning of a piece and write straight through till "The End."

Viewing your work from the meager and terrifying prospect of a point at the end of an endless string of words isn't helpful. It's far more productive to view it as a landscape that you're viewing from above, and whose topographic features include hard parts, easy parts, exposition parts, dialogue parts, parts involving Character A, parts involving Theme B, etc. Viewed like this, your project resembles an illustrated map, or maybe one of those miniature landscapes you see in museums, and it's now accessible to you in its totality.

And now you can use a visualization tool I call the "writercopter," a mental helicopter that can transport you to any place in your piece. The moment you feel you've taken a particular patch of writing as far as you can, hop onto your copter and take it to another section that looks enticing. Work there until you run dry, and then reboard and hop to another part.

What if no part looks appealing? Try writing about the piece, since your alienation from it is probably rooted in the fact that you either need to think it through more or are trying to force it in the wrong direction. In the unlikely event that doesn't help, set the piece aside and let it marinate while you work on something else.

Writing might sometimes be difficult, but it should never be unpleasant; if it is unpleasant—if you're feeling frustrated, bored or stuck—that's not an indication of any deficiency on your part, but simply the signal to move to another part of the project, or another project. While it's okay to practice "writing past the wall," i.e., sticking with a difficult section a bit longer than comfortable, don't perfectionistically dig in your heels and become an antagonist to yourself and your process.

The writercopter technique is similar to that used by the late, great, and famously prolific author Isaac Asimov, who wrote or edited more than 500 books:

> "What if you get a writer's block?" (That's a favorite question.) I say, "I don't ever get one precisely because I switch from one task to another at will. If I'm tired of one project, I just switch to something else which, at the moment, interests me more." [From his memoir, *In Joy Still Felt*.]

Note Asimov's absolute sense of freedom and dominion (authority!) over his work—expressed not in grandiose terms, but the simple ability to do whatever he wants, whenever he wants. And, of course, the total lack of blame, shame, compulsion, and perfectionism.

Nonlinear writing obviously goes hand in hand with free writing; using the techniques together should powerfully speed your writing. What's more, the process is accelerative, since the more

easy parts of your project you finish, the easier the hard parts will get. (By writing "around" the hard parts, you're illuminating them and solving problems related to them.)

You can combine nonlinear writing with Anne Lamott's famous "one-inch picture frame" technique from *Bird by Bird* to get through even the toughest piece of writing. To combat overwhelm, Lamott reminds herself that:

> All I have to do is to write down as much as I can see through a one-inch picture frame … All I'm going to do right now, for example, is write that one paragraph that sets the story in my hometown, in the late fifties, when the trains were still running.

I myself have gotten through very tough patches of writing (meaning, sections where I felt a lot of resistance to the writing—because the patches themselves are neither easy nor hard, but just writing) by switching back and forth between the difficult patch and an easier one, doing "one-inch picture frame"-sized pieces of the tough section and longer stretches of the easy one. The easy patches actually become a reward, in this context, which is in itself a lovely development: writing not as chore, but reward.

Take these techniques to their limit, as I assume Asimov did, and you develop a very light touch around your work. You're hopping everywhere in the writercopter, not in a distracted way but in a focused, effective way—and the writing is almost never a struggle, and the words just pile up.

The alternative is you struggle with grim determination to write the piece linearly. And so you write a page or two and … wham! You're at a hard part and you stop dead. And because you don't know what else to do, you just keep throwing yourself against that wall—until procrastination steps in to "save" you from your predicament.

Tales of Space and Time

Besides seeing projects as complex in space, the prolific also see them as complex in time. While novice writers see writing as "just writing," the prolific see it as a process consisting of these or similar stages:

1. Conceptualization (a.k.a. note-taking or "noodling around")
2. Planning and outlining (a little more structured than above)
3. Research
4. First Draft
5. Revision(s)
6. Final Draft
7. Submission(s)
8. Cash the Check (for freelance and other writers who get paid)

Note how the stage most people think comes first—First Draft—actually appears halfway down. A major cause of unproductivity and blocks is that the writer omits, or skimps on, the earlier stages—which means she is trying to write something she doesn't sufficiently comprehend.

Trying to write a first draft without first spending adequate time on stages 1-3 is like planting a garden without preparing the soil, or building a house atop a shaky foundation: a risky proposition at best. Sure, once in a while a piece will just seem to write itself. But that's usually because we've either thought about it a lot or figured out a link between it and other topics we've thought a lot about. So the early stages were, in fact, done, only perhaps at a different time. (Also, the confidence that comes from writing something familiar helps us resist perfectionism.)

Obviously, the stages differ from project to project, and writer to writer. Some projects demand extensive research, others only a little. Some writers create detailed outlines, while others work from the seat of their pants (the famous "plotters" versus "pantsers" divide). And some writers do the stages mostly linearly, while others jazzily intermingle them. Whatever system works for you, and the particular project you're working on, is the right one.

It's helpful to remember that most of us enjoy working on some stages more than others, and those are the stages we tend to get stuck on if we're prone to procrastination. That's procrastination as a toxic mimic of productive work, and it happens especially with first draft, research, and revision.

Conversely, many writers dislike, or are afraid of, certain stages and try to avoid them. These are, typically, the first draft and submission, as well as marketing and other business "chores."

Armed with the knowledge of the stages of a writing project, you can now use your writercopter to move not just through space (the landscape of your project), but time: more specifically, back to a prior stage whenever you're stuck. I recommend moving back to conceptualization, planning, outlining, or drafting, but not research because it is a frequent vehicle for procrastination.

Another important productivity technique is to identify the easiest parts of your project so that, when all else fails, you can work on them. When, during the writing of this book, I was severely distracted or demotivated, I worked on the bibliography. Why not? It had to get done, and doing it empowered me and helped me get re-motivated as soon as possible.

You can do this temporally, too. The earliest and latest drafts of a project are usually the easiest, because the earliest ones tend to be free and fun (if you don't get perfectionist), and the later ones tend to have most of their elements in place, so that what you're doing is mainly line edits. So if you're working on multiple projects, or a project with multiple sections, all in different phases of completion, do "earlies" and "lates" when feeling distracted or otherwise unmotivated; save the tough middle drafts, where you're trying to make order out of chaos, for when you're feeling fresh and energetic.